

## Hardy Biennials

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**B**iennials flowering plants can be the stand-by of every judicious gardener as their extended life cycle enables you to organize your bedding schemes and keep design and colour in mind for the following year.

True biennials are plants that grow one year, overwinter, then flower, seed and die in the following year. Among them are many of the popular garden plants such as Canterbury bell, honesty and foxglove, also a number of plants usually grown as biennials which are really perennials, such as wallflower, pansy and Sweet William.

Some have such large seeds that it is possible to sow them in their flowering positions, but others will need to be sown in part of the garden reserved for raising seedlings, such as in our seedbed in the north-west corner. They can be thinned out subsequently into rows where they can remain until it is time to plant them in their flowering positions in mid autumn (September). With very fine seeds, like those of foxglove, it is probably better to sow in a flowerpot left outside; once they have germinated, they can be transplanted 15 cm a part into rows in the seedbed and then planted into their flowering positions in the autumn.



### When to sow

The time for sowing depends to a large extent on when the plant will flower the following year. Plants that flower fairly early in the spring, such as wallflower, honesty and pansy, have to make all their growth before the winter so the longer they are given the better it will be later-flowering plants, such as hollyhock, stock, Sweet William or Canterbury bell, will make some further growth after the winter before they start producing flowers so they can be sown somewhat later.

### Mid-Summer (June)

Hoe weeds regularly in all parts of the garden where there is bare earth, to prevent the weeds getting established, seeding and spreading. Always take care not to damage any shallow-rooting cultivated plants.

Continue to plant out half-hardy annuals and sow some in positions where they are to flower to give a longer season of colour.

As climbing plants, and those shrubs treated as climbers, continue to grow and produce new shoots, tie in to the supports where necessary.

From now until early autumn (August) the lawn will probably require mowing twice a week. Cut the grass to 13 mm high. Unless the lawn has been treated with a weedkiller, the grass cuttings should be added to the compost heap.

Keep an eye open for any attacks of pests or diseases on plants and take prompt action by spraying or dusting with the appropriate pesticide according to the manufacturer's instructions. Watch out for signs of reinfestation.

### **Annuals treated as biennials**

There are also some hardy annuals that will produce much larger plants if they are treated as biennials and sown in the autumn (September). The plants that like this treatment include Godetia, Calendula, Candytuft, Echium (Viper's Bugloss), Sweet Pea, Cornflower, Larkspur, Shirely Poppy, *Eschscholtzia* and Annual Clary Sage. Just sow the seeds in rows in drills and leave the young plants until the following spring, when you can transplant them to wherever you want them to flower.

### **Preparing to sow**

Before considering sowing times, you should first think of preparing the ground. The most important things for a young seedling are plenty of light, so that it can manufacture energy, and a fairly light soil so that the roots can penetrate quickly and anchor the plant.

The light will normally be there, unless you sow in the shade of evergreens, but you will have to prepare the soil. It will need loosening up, even if it is a light, sandy one. A very stiff soil is hard for the roots to get into so, if your soil is heavy, dig it, break it up and incorporate some sand or peat into this broken-up soil. If the soil is dry, give it a thorough soaking with water before start your sowing. If the soil has been well soaked the young roots will soon get down to the moisture, even though it may be dry on top.

### **How to sow**

Having got your soil prepared, make a small drill, not more than 2 – 3 cm deep and sow your seeds as thinly as possible rake some soil over them and sit back and wait.

After sowing, biennial seeds usually germinate rapidly enough and you should not have to wait more than fortnight before you see the seedlings appear; usually you will get results even sooner.

With the large seeded plants, which you can put where they are expected to flower, it is wise perhaps to put two seeds in every place and pull out the weaker of the two if both germinate. The distance between the plants when you line (plant) them out will vary according to type and the recommended distances are given below under each plant individually.

### **Thinning and transplanting**

Apart from those seeds sown in situ, you now have two choices. If you do not want many plants, you can just thin the seedlings out and leave them where they are. Alternatively, you can transplant them as soon as they are large enough to handle and leave them in rows until about the middle of autumn (mid September) when you lift them and put them where you want them to flower.

Be sure that the young plants do not dry out when you line them out. The simplest way is to puddle them. You dig a hold to the required depth with a trowel the required depth will be such that the roots can be as deep in the soil as they were before you moved them. Then pop in the plants, fill the hole with water and then push the soil back around the roots. This enables your small biennials to get away without much check, and you want to keep them growing with as few checks as possible.

The Plants should be in their final positions by mid autumn (mid September), to give them a chance to make a little growth and anchor themselves in the fresh soil before the onset of winter. However, this may not always be possible. You may, for example, want to put wallflowers where you now have dahlias. These will not be lifted before late autumn (the end of October), so it may well be early winter (November) before you put in your wallflowers.

The result will be that you won't get quite such a good display in the spring to you would have done if you could have moved the plants earlier, but, failing in absolutely appalling winter, you should still get quite good results.

### Some plants to choose

Here we list some good biennials, in order of flowering.

**Pansy:** Sow in late summer (July) and prick out 15 cm apart. They start to flower in late spring (April) and can go on until late summer (Late July). The blooms come in a variety of rich shades, either single or bi-coloured.

**Wallflower:** So, either in mid or late summer (June or July) Line out 15 cm apart. In flower from late spring (late March) to mid-summer (June) in reds, oranges and yellow colours.

**Honesty:** Should be sown in mid or late summer (June or July), preferably where the plants are to flower. If you do prick them out they should be 25 cm apart. The purple or white flowers appear in early to late summer (May to July). The flat and round silver seed pods which follow are very sought after for winter flower decorations.

**Sweet William:** Sow in late summer (early July) and prick out to 25 cm apart. They flower mid to late summer (June to July) in mixtures of red, white, pink or salmon colours.

**Stock:** It is the Brompton and East Lothian strains that are biennial; the ten-week and the night-scented are annuals. Sow in late summer (early July), and prick out 30 cm apart. It is possible to leave them in the rows until the following spring, in which case they must be put in their final positions in mid spring (March). Flowers are shades of pink, red, lilac, yellow or white, with the Brompton's appearing in early summer (May) and the East Lothians during summer and early autumn (July and August).

**Fox Glove:** These *Digitalis* seeds are so minute that they are best started in a pot. Prick out the seedlings to 30 cm apart and, again, they can be left in the rows until late spring (early April) if it is more convenient. The flower spikes of white, pink, purple and yellows appear in mid-summer (June).

**Canterbury bell:** Sow in summer (May or June). The seeds are very small, so it may be easier to start them in a pot. Prick out the seedlings at least 30 cm apart and once more you can wait to plant them in their final positions until the following late spring (April). They flower in summer (June and July) in white, pink, blue or mauve shades.









**Iceland Poppy:** This needs rather different treatment. All Poppies (or Papaver's) dislike transplanting so you can either sow them where they are to grow, or start them in a pot, prick out or transplant about 5 cm apart into trays and then put them in their final positions the following spring (April). The trouble with sowing them in situ is that the seeds are very tiny, so it is not easy to differentiate between the young seedlings and weeds when thinning them out. Some people treat these poppies like any other biennials with complete success, but it can be a bit tricky. Sow in mid to late summer (late June or early July). They flower from mid-summer (June) until the frosts come, in various shades of pink, orange, red or yellow.

**Mullein:** The one you find catalogued most often is either called *Verbascum broussa* or *V. bombyciferum*. It makes an enormous silver rosette of leaves the first year and the following year sends up a great golden spire 1.2 m high. Sow in mid to late summer (June to July) and prick out 30-45 cm apart. These again can be left until the spring before being put in their final positions. They flower from mid-summer to early autumn (June to August). There are other mulleins which are perennials, but they all want the same treatment.

**Holly Hock:** These have such large seeds that you can put them where you want them to flower. Sow in mid to late summer (June or July) and, if you are pricking out, put the plants 30 cm apart. They flower in shades of pink, white, red, yellow or purple from late summer to mid autumn (July until September).





			
<i>Echium plantagineum</i>	<i>Erysimum cheiri</i> (Wall flower) with profuse showy blooms. Richly-coloured giant pansies	<i>Lunaria annua</i> (Honesty) flowering and seeding in autumn to leave flat silver pods that can be used to make excellent winter decoration	Familiar <i>Digitalis Purpurea</i> (Fox Glove)
			
<i>Papaver nudicaule</i> (Iceland Poppies). Suitable for rock gardens as well as mixed borders.	<i>Verbascum bombyciferum</i> (Giant Mullein)	<i>Matthiola incana</i> ( Stock flower)	<i>Althaea rosea</i> (Holly Hock)